

**"UNEXPECTED VISITORS AT THE MANGER"**

(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

**Scripture Lessons:-** Isaiah 60: 1 - 6; Matthew 2: 1 - 12

I have a friend who has a wonderful collection of nativity sets, gathered from many parts of the world. There are figures in wood; there are ceramic manger scenes; there are some made of bamboo, others of paper. Her home at this time of year becomes a gallery of crèche scenes from dozens of countries and cultures, each depicting the story we have heard and pondered and sung about in these recent weeks.

Here at Eglinton St. George's we have re-told the story in a rich variety of services.

And four weeks ago today, on the third Sunday of Advent, in word and in song, this ancient-yet-always-new drama came alive in a Christmas Pageant - our children and young people helping us to "come to the manger" once again.

Creating the Bethlehem tableau is something most congregations do in one form or another.

// I know of one church in Dundas that rolled large sheets of plastic over the carpet of the sanctuary, so live animals could be led up the aisle, heehawing and baaing at the manger on Christmas Eve. I can imagine that a production like that makes for interesting turn-around time between the 5 o'clock pageant and the 8 o'clock candlelight service. //

// There is a congregation in Bronxville, N.Y., that every year creates a living nativity pageant on the front lawn of their church. They are located right in the centre of town, and people come from miles around to see this live pageant.

The characters of the Christmas story gather in the fellowship hall of the church and wait for their cues before they head out among the live sheep and cows and a donkey, and make their way across the lawn to the Bethlehem stable.

One year the Magi wore not only their regal robes and fancy turbans, but they also borrowed brass censers from the neighbouring orthodox church in order that they could be shrouded in the mystery of smoke and the aroma of incense as they made their way to the manger.

As it came time for their dramatic entrance, they lit the censers, got the incense going and set out across the lawn. They did not realize that inside the church the smoke had set off the sensitive fire alarms, and a few blocks away, an electronic message was flashing in the fire station.

With sirens wailing and strobe lights flashing, the fire department was soon on the scene, convinced that the church was on fire.

It was a Christmas pageant that the city of Bronxville will never forget. There on the front lawn of the church, heading towards the manger, were not only shepherds and angels and Magi from the east, but yellow-slickered firemen unrolling their hoses, intent on extinguishing a fire.

Finally once the firemen figured out what had caused the alarm, the crowd on the lawn distinctly heard the fire chief mutter, "You wise men are setting off alarms all over town!"

(Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, p. 28) //

Would that it were so.

Would that the birth of Jesus would set off alarms all over this community, gathering at the

manger not only shepherds and wise men,  
 but firemen, and police officers, and nurses, and teachers, and housewives,  
 and skateboarders, and hockey players, and garbage collectors, and children,  
 and teens of every culture and background...

Would that the Christmas season would turn the very centre of every community into a holy place  
 where the Christ Child could be born.

Would that our experience of the birth of Jesus would so transform life that alarm bells  
 would go off, and people would race to discover what this is really all about.

Sadly, for far too many of us the birth of Jesus makes no difference at all.

Instead of pausing to ponder the mystery of God coming alive in our midst, we mark the holy  
 birth with an orgy of shopping, an overdose of calories, frayed nerves and stress-laden  
 fatigue. How many of us were secretly a bit relieved, maybe even glad when the  
 frantic, festive season morphed at last into the more routine days of January?

The difficulty is that often we so layer our celebration of Christmas in the wrapping and ribbon of the  
 festive season, that it is not easy for us to discover where the Christ child is being born.

// A couple of years ago, the *New York Times* carried the story of David Storch – a music teacher, who,  
 just before Christmas borrowed from the Brooklyn Public Library a copy of the score of Handel's  
 "*Messiah*". Through a clerical error however, this transaction was not recorded anywhere.

There was no record that this one and only copy had been taken out.

As Christmas approached, there were several other requests for the score, and the library staff,  
 unaware that it had been checked out, searched diligently but in vain for the music,  
 spending many hours going through the stacks.

On the day that Storch returned it to the library, he placed the copy on the circulation desk, and was  
 startled when the staid librarian shouted, "The '*Messiah*' is here! The '*Messiah*' is back!"

Every head in the library turned toward her voice, wondering what was going on.

But as the *Times* reported, "Just a few minutes later everyone went back to work as  
 if nothing had happened." //

Is that all the impact that the coming of the Messiah has in our world, do you think – just a bit of a  
 glance, just a bit of a nod, then business as usual?

How many of us in this past week, went back to work, picked up where we had left off  
 before Christmas, retrieved the emails we had put on hold, loaded our January  
 calendars with meetings and appointments, and began to deal with the stack  
 of correspondence in our inboxes – business as usual as if nothing  
 extraordinary had happened to us.

At least, according to Luke, "the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard  
 and seen." That is the way their manger-visit affected them.

And once the Magi had "opened their treasure chests, and offered him their gifts of gold,  
 frankincense and myrrh," they "left for their own country by another road," –  
 took a detour in order to avoid Herod – that tyrant with the look of murder  
 in his eyes.

It seems that neither shepherds nor magi lingered long in the presence of this newborn child.

They had to get back to their work with the sheep;

they had to return to their homes in the east and the responsibilities that awaited them there.

But it is my hope that they might have had some kind of *epiphany* – that life might have been very different for them, after they had knelt in the Bethlehem straw. I like to think that perhaps they had acquired a deeper appreciation for life’s mystery, life’s holiness, life’s beauty.  
 Perhaps in that mating of heaven and earth, they began to experience what pure, holy love – God’s extravagant love -- was like.

I wonder if those firemen who unwittingly became part of the pageant in Bronxville, N.Y. returned to the fire hall any differently on that Christmas Eve.

When they finally finished their shift and returned home, and were asked by their partners, “Where did work take you tonight?”, I wonder if they might have said,  
 “Tonight I went to the manger... and it made a difference...”

I wonder if your visit to the manger has made any difference in your life this year...

That Hallmark scene with shepherds smelling of sheep and the midnight fire, rubbing shoulders with regal visitors holding their expensive gifts is our way of trying to convey an even deeper truth -- that God’s love gathers both the mighty and the mundane at the manger, which is to say that each of us – every single one of us – is welcome to behold “the glory of God” “wrapped in swaddling bands, squirming in the manger.”

Epiphany is really what happens to unremarkable people like us, groping our way through a shadowed world when suddenly, and in ways we do not fully understand, the mystery of God’s love comes alive for us.

This much I know – when that happens,  
 when we dare to move closer so we too can catch an unobstructed glimpse of God,  
 and find ourselves speechless in the holiness of that birth-moment,  
 life will never be the same for us – ever again.  
 ..... It does make a difference.....

Amen.